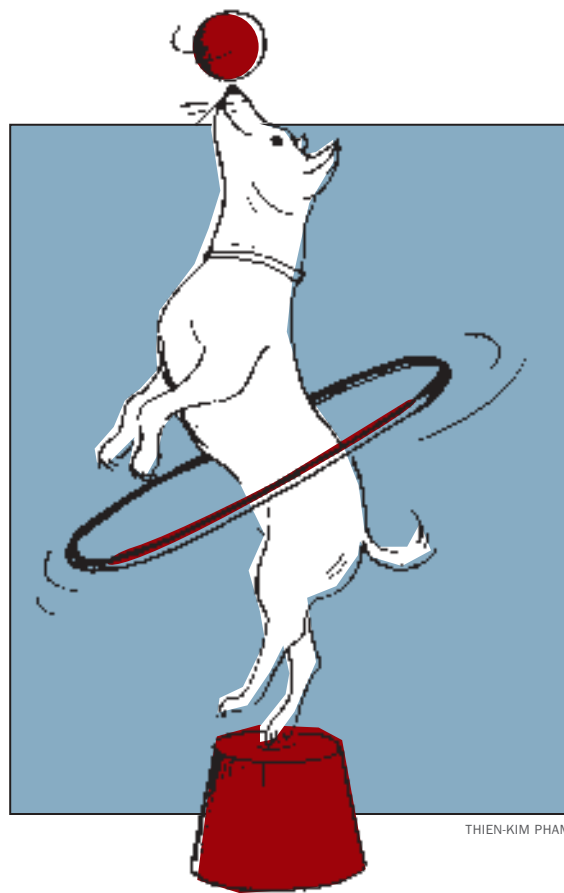


An Old Dog and New Tricks

BY W. SCOTT CAMERON



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As I approach my 55th birthday, the old adage

“you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” keeps coming to mind. I’m not sure why, because I don’t feel old and I’m still interested in taking on new challenges and learning new tricks. However, as I mentor new project managers, I am also aware that others may consider me an old dog unable to learn new tricks. To the contrary, the people I mentor continue to teach me new tricks and challenge my assumptions about project management.

FOR EXAMPLE, I WAS MENTORING A NEW PROJECT MANAGER and we were looking for ways to reduce our engineering and overall project costs. One option we considered was offshore (non-U.S.-based) design engineering. The young project manager was eager to experiment, but I had never tried this concept before and knew other project managers who had with bad results. Nevertheless, the concept still intrigued me.

There was a nine-hour time difference between our office and the offshore engineering office we were considering—as well as a language difference. I could just imagine the nightmare of being that far apart and trying to clean up a project gone awry. The schedule and cost implications to the business proposal would be horrific. Since neither of us wanted to risk the entire project design, we agreed to prototype this concept on a specific portion of the project.

We worked with our engineering contractor to select one element of our design for execution in their offshore office. Someone on the contractor's staff had previously worked in this office and understood their capabilities. His familiarity with their strengths and weaknesses was integral to our prototype strategy.

The potential risks of our strategy should not be understated. The offshore option generally isn't considered unless the potential savings are high for either the contractor or client. Working offshore, in this case, wasn't going to yield a huge savings for the project or for the engineering contractor. But we saw its value as a learning experience. And since we weren't putting the entire project at risk and we had a person in place with strategic knowledge, we could present our idea as a prototype execution strategy with manageable risk. In the end, upper management accepted our plan.

We defined the work we wanted designed and transmitted it electronically. We also had two of the offshore office's lead engineers visit our site to understand how we worked and what we needed. They stayed for three weeks, and this face-to-face time was invaluable. With these personal relationships created and a better understanding of how each other worked, the

design was completed on schedule and with no increases in construction costs.

I understand now the key fundamentals of what it takes to make an offshore project successful, as does the project manager I was mentoring. Now that I'm a bit wiser on this subject, I would certainly consider

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going offshore again. Though we didn't save money on this project, the potential for that is certainly there on bigger projects.

Here is what I learned: It worked because we were able to mitigate the perceived/real "offshore risk." We worked through someone who already knew their offshore engineering culture and how to get work done there, plus we took the time to meet with their engineers. Good communication is the key to success on any project. If you're separated by nine time zones, you must figure out a way to bridge that gap, same as you do when you're separated by nine cities, nine floors of an office building, or nine doors on the same floor.

I doubt I would have chosen this option had I not been mentoring someone who was as curious to learn "something new" as I am. Because I was working with someone in a learning situation, he stimulated my curiosity and excitement to learn a new trick. The mentoring arrangement was a stimulus to experiment with the prototype.

Mentoring, at its richest, is a two-way street. •



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